Sister Caridad Inda, CHM, PhD: Bridging Cultures

Sister Caridad Inda, CHM, PhD, a sister of the Congregation of Humility of Mary has spent a career bridging cultures and languages in service of the nonviolent pursuit of justice, particularly in Latin America and in the Catholic Church.

Born in Mexico, Caridad has a PhD in Political Science with a focus on Latin America.

Throughout her ministry she has had a variety of emphases, combining a love of translation with a passion for justice and all forms of liberation: political, ecclesiastical, and educational. Her love of translation comes from her mother, who lived in both Mexico and the United States and knew the importance of learning English. *“When I was in first grade, she would send me to school with my lunch and my book to translate, and I had to translate a page or two during lunchtime. I love to translate and think it’s wonderful. For me it’s pleasurable.”*

**Cirimex: Intercultural Ministry**

Together with longtime PAX member Sister Kevin Bissell, CHM, Caridad founded and ran CIRIMEX, a language and culture center in Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico. The program exposed North American seminarians and others to the Spanish language and Latin American culture to prepare them for serving Latin American congregations in the United States.

Caridad notes that some seminarians came into their training with an “imperialistic” mindset, blind to the experiences of Latin American Christians. Broadening their minds was a central focus of CIRIMEX’ work. *“We were... very interested in helping people realize that they were changing as they were learning all these other things. They were becoming bicultural and broader in their scope of vision of what the church is about....and how important it was to communicate with the people they were going to be serving, in a way that was not imperial...”*

When Caridad and Kevin founded CIRIMEX in 1982, *“It was a bad time for Hispanics because nobody could understand them in the United States. They weren’t even aware there was a problem.”* The CIRIMEX program had students live with Mexican host families and use the Spanish language all the time. *“Just being here, living with a Mexican family and going with them to church and the market, just life, changed some of them.”* Caridad would also encourage the students to reflect on how they were changing. *“When they came, they were so scared and unprepared that it was difficult. But the people were kind and helped them along.”*

Sister Kevin Bissell, who was assigned as a “big sister” to Caridad when she first became a nun (<https://catholicmessenger.net/2015/04/sister-inda-reflects-on-consecrated-life/>)

worked closely with Caridad on CIRIMEX for some 35 years until her death in 2017. Caridad remembers, *“She was a very smart person. Not everyone realized that, and some didn’t care, so they gave her a hard time. She had a very difficult life because she was so smart.”* When they collaborated on founding and running CIRIMEX, *“We found that I could do things that she couldn’t do and vice versa, and they matched. We were a good team because we could work that way.”* Sr. Kevin’s work often kept her in the United States, but “*She often came here [to Mexico] in the summers, sowed, cared for plants, did the dirty work that needed to be done. It was not a matter of ‘I’m important’.”*

As of 2023, CIRIMEX faces closure because of COVID-era uncertainties. *“I didn’t feel it was safe for the students and fair to have them come and not be able fulfill our promise of complete immersion.”*

**Liberation Theology**

Much of Caridad’s work concerned liberation theology—a body of thought that sees the pursuit of social, political and economic justice as a central part of Christian practice. Together with John Eagleson, Caridad translated into English the seminal book A Theology of Liberation by Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutiérrez. Their translation, published in 1973, sold 50,000 copies in less than two years (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A\_Theology\_of\_Liberation).

Caridad notes that Gutiérrez was one of many Latin American thinkers calling for liberation of the oppressed in various areas of life. For example, Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970*) “Did for education what liberation theology did for theology. He opened up the system and showed that the problem was not to teach through memorization, but to have [students] change and work on their own and became subjects of their own development.”* Both Gutiérrez’ and Freire’s approach resembled Mahatma Gandhi’s, Caridad notes. *“Gandhi said to the Indians; “You are people. You are subjects. You don’t have to be anybody’s slave. You think about it. You learn. You are a person.... Gandhi moved the whole country and got the people to realize they didn’t need to be slaves.”* Caridad muses, “*If I had enough time and energy ....it would be interesting to compare the various approaches to liberation of writers such as Gutiérrez, Freire, Gandhi and Gene Sharp. We all agree that you have to liberate yourself.”* As a translator, Caridad notes in passing, *“Freire is very good, but his thought process is convoluted. It takes forever to get things translated if he’s the author.”*

**Nonviolent Resistance**

Caridad has also focused on movements of nonviolent resistance to injustice. *“For me nonviolence is really a power tool,”* and should be put into action. *“You can’t just say ‘I’m nonviolent’. It takes a lot of personal change, it has a lot to do with how you feel about it and how much effort you’re willing to put forth, and it isn’t something easy. If you’re serious about it, it becomes a way of life, not just an action.”*

Caridad’s favorite person who worked on nonviolence was Gene Sharp. *“He devoted his whole life to nonviolence, writing about it, explaining it, giving examples, fighting with people about it, going into the Burma jungle to be with the people who were actually using his ideas.”* Caridad collaborated with Gene Sharp on the 2013 edition of How Nonviolent Struggle Works. (<https://www.aeinstein.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/How-Nonviolent-Struggle-Works.pdf>) and translated his book From Dictatorship to Democracy into Spanish in 2003. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20060212054919/https://www.aeinstein.org/organizations1882.html>).

She notes that one of Gene Sharp’s principles was *“don’t act until you know what you’re talking about.”* She remembers working with the American Catholic Council (ACC), which PAX member John Hushon co-chaired, to develop a program of study and dialogue focused on nonviolent resistance to injustice in the governance of the Catholic Church. Caridad remembers*, “Gene Sharp gave us a 900 page reading list. We were supposed to read that before we started thinking about how we might do something.”*

The summary of Caridad’s course (<https://www.arcc-catholic-rights.net/index.php/online-news/arcc-news-2014/20-january-2014>) boils down Gene Sharp’s approach to three main points: that hierarchical structures depend on the obedience of the governed; that obedience is voluntary, and that *“if enough of the oppressed resist for a long enough period of time, the structure changes or collapses.”*

Gene Sharp’s philosophy of nonviolent action—as well as his famous list of 198 techniques that has been used over the years--has inspired resistance movements in countries like Myanmar (formerly Burma), Serbia, Iran, Ukraine, and Georgia, as well as the Arab Spring and the Occupy movement. Officials in Iran, Venezuela and elsewhere have attempted to discredit him by saying he was a front for the CIA (https://www.aeinstein.org/category/pastposts/page/3/).

**Heart of the Empire**

Coming of age in Latin America at a time of heavy-handed US involvement there, Caridad tends toward skepticism of the US government. “*The US has a lot of good things about it ... but it is the empire.”* She has had to reconcile this distrust of the US establishment with respect for people who have chosen to work within it. For example, when Sister Kevin Bissell served as Assistant Commissioner to longtime PAX member John Ahearne when he served as Chairman of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) (<https://www.ilesfuneralhomes.com/obituary/Sister-Mary-Kevin-Bissell-CHM/Johnston-IA/1714734>), Caridad recalls that Sr. Kevin used to say, *“It’s important to keep people from being burned to death, so this is something I should be doing...It was the best job she had.”*

She acknowledges meeting other people at PAX who worked for the US government but did not have an “imperialistic” attitude: Lee and Foster Collins, for example, and Bob and Lois Merrill. Lee Collins taught reading and English as a Second Language; *“When she lived in Argentina, she learned enough Spanish that she could communicate well with people...They were concerned about the people.”*

Musing on dramatic developments in the world and in the Catholic Church, *“I think it’s an interesting time to be alive. I feel like I’m living in a movie and don’t know what tomorrow’s act is going to be.”*